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CREDENTIALISM AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

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EXISTING SOCIAL AND OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURES SHOULD BE REMADE SO THAT CREDENTIALISM DOES NOT ARBITARILY BAR NEGROES AND THE POOR FROM ECONOMIC WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL MOBILITY. GRADUATION FROM A SCHOOL SIMPLY IMPLIES THAT ONE HAS FIT INTO THE PROPER EDUCATIONAL STRAITS AND DOES NOT NECESSARILY SIGNAL QUALITY PERFORMANCE. CREDENTIALISM AND ITS CONCOMITANT RATIONALE OF EXCLUSION PREVAIL BECAUSE EMPLOYERS ARE FREQUENTLY RELUCTANT TO MAKE SUBJECTIVE CHOICES WHEN HIRING. MOREOVER, EMPLOYERS IN THE PUBLIC AND HUMAN SERVICES TEND TO BE UNCERTAIN OF PERFORMANCE CRITERIA AND THUS USE THE EMPLOYEE'S CREDENTIALS TO DETERMINE HIS "PRODUCTION OUTPUT." MANY ORGANIZATIONS EMPHASIZE CREDENTIALS BECAUSE THEY ARE CONCERNED WITH SOCIAL APPEARANCES AND BECAUSE THEY WISH TO HIRE A SURPLUS OF "TOP-NOTCHERS" WHO WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR HIGH LEVEL PROMOTION. RATHER THAN RELYING ON AN EMPLOYEE'S CREDENTIALS, EMPLOYERS MIGHT INSTEAD BE GUIDED BY THE PRINCIPLE OF "JOB FIRST, TRAINING LATER." PRIVATE ENTERPRISE AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD SEEK OUT AND CULTIVATE THE TALENTS OF DISADVANTAGED PERSONS, ESPECIALLY FOR NONPROFESSIONAL CAREERS. ALSO, NEW MEANS OF CREDENTIALING MIGHT BE ESTABLISHED, AND MORE OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED FOR THE EXPANSION OF CREDENTIALS. THIS PAPER WAS PREPARED FOR THE AMERICAN ORTHOPSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., MARCH 23, 1967. (LB)

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To be poor or colored is to be excluded. Our efforts to reduce poverty are not to bring everybody up to a fixed line but to reduce the gaps between those at the bottom and those who are luckier. The poor--shorthand for the unequal--suffer not so much from absolute deprivation, although that occurs much too frequently, but increasingly from relative deprivation. They are not fully sharing in the material gains of society.

From this perspective we are engaged in a struggle for inclusion of the poor and discriminated into the main developments of society--the economic affluence, the political independence and protection which rising incomes and education do provide. Our efforts in civil rights and poverty are, then, efforts to remake the social class structure of this country--reducing the percentage of those in the bottommost groups of society, reducing the gaps between this group and the rest of society.

We are engaged in a gigantic, though inarticulate, effort at social mobility as we attempt to reduce the number we call poor. Our concern is to cut even further and more rapidly the link between the income, education and occupation of parents and the prospects of their children. While the United States has never had the social mobility which the Horatio Alger stories conveyed, it has probably always had a high rate of movement away from parents' levels into higher levels. Today the demand for a faster rate of improvement is greater than ever before, especially for Negroes. Though gains have been made, they are not widespread enough.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Education, which once probably served as a great means of ascendancy for the poor, now is becoming a bar to the new poor's effort to change conditions. The hope of one generation becomes the barrier of the next.

Education served to free society to a considerable degree from the rule of nepotism and arbitrariness. Educational qualifications rather than connections alone became important. Standards which applied to (almost) everyone meant that the rewards of privilege were not as great as before. Thus, education was a contributor to the democraticizing of society.

But note that I said "was." For today the insistence on education as a prerequisite for jobs is becoming a barrier to the occupational ascendancy of today's disprivileged. That is what I want to talk about today.

We have become a credential society, where one's educational level is more important than what he can do. People cannot obtain jobs that they could well fill because they lack educational qualifications. Negroes who dropped out of the educational steeplechase before a high school diploma cannot get jobs. Employers and the better-off do not feel that there is discrimination; rather the low-educated are "not qualified."

The assumption is that we have a very well organized economy with a rational purpose and methodology. Jobs are organized in the most rational forms possible; the persons who can best perform these jobs are in them. The excluded are excluded because they lack the requisite ability. Merit is recognized and rewarded. In one version of this portrait we have a meritocracy where talent gets its just reward.

But any probing of this rational surface reveals the confusion and ambiguity which prevail. Industry seeks to employ the most qualified workers, yet Ivar Berg has discovered that at every occupational level the high-educated have a poorer record than the low-educated: more absenteeism, turnover, dissatisfaction, and probably lower productivity.

Perhaps most striking in Professor Berg's study is that few companies even know the connections between the educational level of their employees and their performance. They have not bothered to probe their records to find out if their beliefs accord with the results of their practice.

I focus on the exclusion of the low-educated, but the processes that we are concerned about build Chinese walls of exclusion around an increasing number of occupations. We have a new guild system of credentials, licenses, certificates--largely built on the base of education--which keeps people out of many occupational channels. There is increasingly, for many occupations, only one route in--that to be taken only when young. Failing to take that route bars one forever from the possibilities of that occupation.

Presumably these credentialing procedures assure a better product--those who receive the credentials can do much better in the occupation than those who do not; those who successfully go through the steps needed to gain the credentials are better fit for the occupation than those who are not interested to go through these steps or fail to succeed in the prescribed educational climb.

I submit that we do not know if these two assumptions are true. To some extent they are undoubtedly untrue. And, if we take a broader assumption, that those who do not go through credentialing activities are unfit for the demands of the occupation, then that is clearly inaccurate. All of us know of individuals who cannot get jobs that they would be able to perform well because they lack the appropriate credentials--whether it is a high school diploma or a Ph.D. Last year when I spoke on this issue more than two dozen people came up to me afterward to give me personal witness of how they had been barred from activities which they were confident they could do well because they lacked some required credential.

Schools today are not a humanizing nor a educational force as much as a credentialing agency, sorting people out who do not fit into the regular channels of educational development. Schools function to certify that someone is not harmful rather than to develop the potential of all. Many of the poverty and job training programs serve the same function.

One does not have to accept my sweeping condemnation of credentialism in American society as a threat to social mobility of the discriminated and poor and as a bar to full utilization of every citizen's abilities to be disturbed by its galloping growth.

Why is credentialism growing? One reason is that we like to assume that our world is rational and scientific. We invest confidence in the present structuring of occupations as optimal; then the question becomes how best to fit people into these wisely constructed occupations.

Then we presume that we know enough to sort out "potential" and "ability" from their opposites. Consequently, we repose an enormous misplaced confidence in testing and educational achievement--that is, getting by in schools--even when we have quivers of doubt about their "real meaning." But the latent gains of resting on objective measures is that it seems to take away notions of irrationality and discrimination in favor of universally applied, objective rules. Where there has been oversupply of labor and talent, then processes of exclusion on some basis will occur. But when shortages occur as now in many professions, maintenance of exclusion as the core process is obviously peculiar. Such peculiarity is undoubtedly based on some fear--a fear of having to make choices and exercise judgment.

This fear is related to the third reason for the spreading tide of credentialism. More and more results and achievements are difficult to measure in a service-growing society. Norms of production output are difficult to use in the professions

or in government service. Ambiguity of purpose further compounds the measurement problems. If 70 percent of patients seeing a physician have no ascertainable medical reason for being there, how does one measure the achievement and productivity of the physician? Our uncertainty about what is the product and how to measure effectiveness throws us back to the input--that is, what is the training of the occupational incumbent?

A fourth reason for emphasizing exclusion is the "marshall's baton" syndrome. Napoleon asserted that his military prowess was based not only on his kitchens but on his promotion outlook--every soldier carried a marshall's baton in his knapsack, ready to jump into a command position. In many occupations and organizations, the notion, at least for men, is frequently to employ only "top-notchers" who can move to the peak of the pyramid. Yet, the possibilities of moving to the top are slim indeed. In many organizations there is enormous turnover; only very few stay very long, and yet the notion is of "long-distance promotability." Furthermore, as Robert K. Merton has pointed out, there is no possible definition of "top-notchers" nor an adequate number of them, so that organizations and professions are doomed to feel that they are being shortchanged in their share of "top-notchers." The important thing in this context is that the "marshall's baton" syndrome serves to make it appear wise to exclude many, even when talent and ability are in short supply. And certainly it caters to the yearning for prestige to be able to say that the profession or organization has only top-qualified people.

A fifth reason for credentialism is the importance of social appearance. As organizations and professions not only become more uncertain about criteria of performance, but require more intricate "teamwork," getting along with others, appearing "mature," and more acceptable to the public to be serviced, the desirability of insisting

on educational credentials grows. For the credentials certify not educational achievement but personal servicability--that one knows how to get by, conform, manage. The educational failures--at whatever level--are social failures, bad risks.

Does my attack on credentialism imply that there should be no standards of training, no qualifications for entrance into occupations? (Note, as has William Goode, that we seldom raise the question whether individuals perform well enough to be permitted to stay in an occupation.) I don't think that these are the implications, though my impatience with exclusion processes at a time when we need inclusion processes may lead me to border on an across-the-board disclaimer against credentials in any form. But that is not my reasoned view.

What I think are implied in my analysis are the following:

1. There should be a general downgrading of the importance of education as the major credential. Experience and performance should gain greater importance than they now have. Many people will not be seriously considered for a job because they lack educational credentials; prospective employers will not even pause to investigate whether the low-educated can perform well. The absence of the certificates results in automatic exclusion. Individuals should be judged on what they can do rather than where and how long they have gone to school.

If we treated experience and performance seriously, civil service regulations would be changed so that low education was not an automatic bar to many positions. Testing would be downgraded in favor of trying people in jobs and then assessing their performance. In many situations, like that of school principals, we get many people who are good at taking tests but are poor performers on the job.

Since much of job training today is not relevant to work, there should be a strong movement towards "Jobs first, training later." The absence of this practice means that many minority group members are now serving lifetime sentences of low-income and unemployment for their educational delinquencies.

"Dropout" is a label assigned at 16; it persists through a lifetime. The consequence is that individuals who may have outgrown the issues which propelled them out of school or who now have demonstrated and developed considerable skill are still economically disenfranchised because of their youthful educational difficulties. Once a dropout, always a dropout. As in many other aspects of American life, we need a de-labeling procedure which takes the curse off individuals who once ran afoul of conventional styles and were labeled and cast aside--whether the label is "dropout," "delinquent," or "mental patient."

2. We need deepened awareness of and respect for the abilities of those who have educational difficulties. We should not believe that our educational hurdles infallibly pick those who should be successes and unerringly cast aside those who should be failures. Nor that employment testing services are much better.

As we increasingly face the manpower problems of scarce talent, the great hope will be in the cultivation of talents among those who are now disadvantaged.

I do not wish to imply that every poor individual deserves and can use a marshall's baton. But many can. The failure is in cultivating these talents. We have much to learn here that we will not learn if we persist in the new fashion of denouncing poverty families for their deficiencies as educational environments. We then excuse the schools for their failures to learn how to adapt to and develop different varieties of students.

The first step of liberation from the shibboleths of invincible ignorance is to recognize the educational and occupational potential of many who have difficulty with educational systems as they are presently conducted.

I always think in this connection of the youth we interviewed in Syracuse--dropouts who were denoted as "unemployable," "hard core." At the beginning of the

interviews they were laconic, uncommunicative, inarticulate, unintelligent. When we succeeded in involving them in the interview and they responded to us, they became expressive, near-poets, with a fine touch for the exact feeling or analysis.*

3. We need new channels of credentialing and new points at which credentials can be expanded. While I am eager to see reduced emphasis on educational credentials, I am realistic enough to know that this kind of change is slow. Consequently, we must make it easier for individuals to obtain educational credentials.

Today, if one does not get 12 or 16 or 18 or 20 years of education in the orthodox way of continuous immersion without a break in the apparatus of formal education, one has much reduced chances of gaining credentials.

We should more effectively develop school programs and procedures so that once out does not mean permanently lost. Education and training will be increasingly a discontinuous process for the high-educated in American society, as they will need new kinds of education at various points in their careers. The same attitude should prevail towards those who have not successfully weathered the educational system to high school or college graduation or beyond. They should be in practice re-entering and benefiting from education and training at various points in their lives.

To some extent the poverty programs are new credentialing systems in our society. Experience in the Job Corps or in the Neighborhood Youth Corps or in Manpower Development and Training Act programs may not be primarily important in terms of providing skills. Rather, employers may be more willing to hire youth who have gone through one of these self-selection and molding systems. Neighborhood Youth Corps experience may be a new way of getting a credential which employers will accredit and accept.

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*Ira Harrison and I have reported on them in "Types of Dropouts--'The Unemployables'" in Shostak and Gomberg, eds., Blue Collar World.

By multiplying the number of credential channels, we make it easier for individuals to gain them. Those defeated by our educational system at age 16 might be able to get needed credentials at age 18, 22, or 30. One should have second, third, fourth chances and ways of getting credentials. The more different ways of getting credentials, the less the number of people who would fail to get some of the brownie points needed for acceptance into the main economy.

What is needed is the idea of a Second-Chance University which permits "dropout" adults to get further and more useful opportunities to get credentials. Experience should be given educational credit; courses should be more relevant to activities--liberal arts education need not be taught in traditional ways in order to reach traditional ends. While there is need for a formal structure to facilitate re-entry into the educational atmosphere, there is also need to recharge that educational atmosphere so that it is more hospitable and useful to those who have found the established educational practices less than useful or stimulating.

4. Every credential system should have an escape clause which permits the unusual person to be admitted to the realm of the elect. As professions "tighten" up their qualifications, there is usually a "grandfather clause" which exempts oldtimers from meeting the new qualifications. A similar idea is involved here of exemptions from usual practices. At least 5 percent of each year's entrants into a profession or other highly credentialed occupation should be individuals who have "qualified" in non-usual ways--taking tests without the traditional educational prerequisites, getting credit for enriched experiences, etc. Some collective bargaining contracts have a similar provision: the company is allowed to hire back after a cutback up to 10 percent of the labor force without paying attention to seniority; the other 90 percent of the labor force must be rehired according to seniority. The company is permitted some margin of choice and selectivity to meet its production needs.

Without a minimum percentage, it is unlikely that there would be in practice unusual entrance into the field of what might turn out to be a "creative minority." Arbitrariness and favoritism could be avoided by a blue-ribbon panel of decision-makers.

The need here, as in so many other parts of our society, is for making pluralism possible in a complex, variegated society. We need a variety of social inventions to provide the structure and the reality of pluralism.

5. We should not assume that the present structuring of occupations is optimum. There are many jobs--e.g., school superintendent or a policy-oriented social theorist like me, that are impossible; too many different kinds of skills are needed and too many time-consuming tasks--that should be broken down into finer tasks for many hands. On the other hand, many jobs should be enlarged to absorb greater responsibility.

The emerging position of the non-professional is interesting here. The tasks of a professional job--like those of a social worker or nurse or teacher--are broken down into smaller units and combined in ways that permit less trained people to perform them. Sometimes the recombination produces services which the professional was not able to provide. These new positions could reduce the great unmeetable demand for professional services. With the tightening up of educational qualifications, it will be increasingly difficult to turn out an adequate number of professionals. As a consequence, the role of professionals should increasingly be that of making it possible for less trained people to do effective work.

But this rational role is moving very slowly. There are grave limitations on what non-professionals are allowed to do; there is the absence of a career structure that permits many non-professionals to move into the middle class and into the elite stratum of the professional activity.

Professionals are increasingly becoming the gatekeepers of the welfare state, deciding on "professional" grounds who receives what kind of services and who is allowed to perform various services. The pivotal importance of professional and organizational services has led many of the new left students to focus on the professionals as the "enemy." While the assault is overdone and frequently misguided, there is something to the view that professions are hardening into barriers rather than aids. The guild-like features of professional occupations frequently are more visible than their commitment to broad social concerns, though there does seem to be important growth here. The emphasis on "competence" and "quality" frequently means a lack of attention to the poor or to those who do not easily fit into professional activities.

The slowness with which the non-professional is catching on--in being permitted to do broad jobs, in having chances to move up the occupational ladder--is indicative of the failure of professionals to reassess their roles today.

But I do not want to criticize professionals alone. For business deserves criticism here as well. Private enterprise could probably get needed labor (and at high productivity levels) if it restructured jobs so that the less trained could perform at least parts of them. The credentials problem is an issue vital to both the private and public sectors. The national interest of gaining decent employment for the low-educated and the poor could be joined with the private interest of profit.

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We live in a <u>pseudo-meritocracy</u> where individuals are presumed to be selected for talent and placed into appropriate squares. Education becomes the major route to social mobility as the historic alternative routes are shut off. As social mobility becomes more important in our national policies, we narrow down the routes to it.

I have raised some issues about credentialism and professionalism chiefly in terms of the poor and discriminated. But as in so many other realms of our existence, the needs of the poor focus issues that are important to many others. For example, if I had discussed the problem of credentialism in terms of that permanent category of the near-Ph.D.--the individual with some graduate training and much rich experience who is never going to get a Ph.D. and is therefore barred from many posts--many more would see the poignancy of the issue of credentialism. (Incidentally, my social invention here would be to give a Ph.D. to individuals of training and worthwhile experience who have passed the age of 35.)

The general issue which the plight of the poor and discriminated raise is that of a hardening and narrowing of society into fewer and fewer acceptable routes to economic improvement. That is a problem which all of us should be concerned about, for it also is involved in the issues of the general climate of our society.

We are slowly and rather hazily re-examining core values and practices of our society. My contention is that we avoid our anxieties by relying on the processes of schools to resolve our value choices. We prefer the patina of rationality to the search for equity and purpose.